WASHTENAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY—Founded December 19, 1857

Washtenaw Impressions

MARCH, 1975

VICE–PRESIDENT'S CORNER

With our president off to the Florida Keys for a week-long holiday, the task of filling the president's column has fallen on your underwhelmed vice-president, So here goes.

Your board of directors has been working diligently to amend and update the Society's constitution and bylaws.

A special effort has been made to provide for participation in Washtenaw County Historical Society projects and activities by members of the various local historical groups in the county. To this end, a luncheon meeting was held with representatives of the local groups and your president and vice-president on Wednesday, February 26.

Saline, Manchester, Milan, Ypsilanti and Chelsea were represented. The meeting was most productive. There were a number of good suggestions as to how we might cooperate on various projects, including the major county project of building a county museum; exchange of items for display; communications; joint memberships; and several other possible areas. We will have more meetings of this kind in the future.

The Second Annual Southeast Region Historical Conference will meet in Okemos, Mich., Saturday, May 3, 1975. We would like to see a good representation of our members there. It will be an informal and stimulating exchange of ideas on topics of common interest. If you are interested please get in touch with Hazel Proctor.

Thomas F. Lacy

MAYOR COPELAND'S MARK ON ANN ARBOR WILL BE TOPIC AT MARCH MEETING

A Dexter native who became United States Senator from New York state started his political career as Mayor of Ann Arbor from 1901-1903. He was Dr. Royal S. Copeland.

Franke Wilhelme, director of the Historical Society of Michigan, will trace Dr. Copeland's mayoral career and the issues he faced at the March meeting of the Washtenaw Historical Society.

It will be at 8 p.m. Thursday, March 20, in Liberty Hall in Ann Arbor Federal Savings & Loan, Liberty and Division Sts., Ann Arbor.

Two competing interurbans wanted to lay track into Ann Arbor during Dr. Copeland's term of office. The city thought the privately-owned Ann Arbor Water Co. was charging it excessive rent for fire hydrants. More parks were needed and there was a struggle over fiscal responsibility. (Some things haven't changed!)

GENEALOGY SECTION WILL HEAR LANSING SPEAKERS

The art of making rubbings, especially cemetery inscriptions, will be demonstrated at the next meeting of the Genealogy Section of WHS by Mr. and Mrs. Chester A. Trout of Lansing.

Mrs. Trout is reference librarian at the state library in Lansing. The meeting is planned at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, April 20, the location to be announced.

For further information, telephone Polly Bender, secretary, 668-6925 or Alloa Anderson, 663-2128.

LONGTIME ANN ARBORITES' RECOLLECTIONS RECORDED

An oral history project, started during Ann Arbor's Sesquicentennia year, will become a permanent addition to the store of local history

Lydia Muncy of the Society recorded interviews with about 25 representatives of long-time Ann Arbor families which she is now transcribing for the Michigan Historical Collections.

Mrs. Muncy says that while she probably didn't make any great historical discoveries, she thinks such interviews can provide a lot of detail about the quality of life here over the years.

She started by going through City Directories for 1872 and 1892 to find families still here at the latter time and then found present day representatives still in town.

In spite of the transience of Ann Arbor population she found that there were many more persons who could have been interviewed had time and energy allowed.

Interviewees include Linda Eberbach, Florence Hiscock, Martin Howard, Alice Hall, Mary Mummer and Mr. Wetherbee.

APRIL MEETING ON SUNDAY

The April meeting of the Washtenaw Historical Society will be at 4 p.m. Sunday, April 27, at the Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments on the U-M North Campus.

It will be a forum discussion on the finding and restoring of the Clark-Chapin piano by those persons most closely involved in the project. They include Prof. Kurt Pickut, Leigh Anderson, Herbert Bartlett and Lela Duff.

AUTO CHANGED ROMANCE, BANDITRY, ALMOST EVERYTHING

By David L. Lewis

To appreciate fully the auto's impact on Michigan it would help if one were a centenarian, with a vivid memory who had lived and traveled throughout the state for much of his life. In fact, he could likely prepare this talk without recourse to outside information.

Such a mythical centenarian would have been born in an era vastly different from the one he would know even in the 1920's--a decade by which the auto had already largely reshaped Michiganians' way of life. During his youth, in the 1880's and 1890's, he was taking for granted a good many 19th century marvels--the railroad, the telegraph, and even the telephone and electric light, to name a few. But in many ways his life was not too different from his grandfather's. Railroads were used for intercity travel, and Shanks' ponies--his feet --bicycles, and horse-drawn conveyances were used for lesser trips.

If our 100-year-old Michiganian lived on a farm during his youth, as did half of the citizenry in the late 19th century, he and his family probably felt a certain sense of isolation. They rode over a dusty or muddy road to a nearby village on Saturdays to trade, and they likely attended services at a country church on Sundays. Some attended Saturday night dances and Sunday afternoon picnics. On rare occasions, they'd take the train into the city. But most of the time, they stayed home, largely cut off from the outside world in the days before rural free delivery, the radio, and the automobile.

If our 100-year-old citizen had lived in Ann Arbor, Detroit, or another city, he went to work and to places of entertainment on foot or by bicycle, horse, or eventually electric streetcar. If he wanted to escape the city, the bicycle likely was his best bet. City dwellers perhaps didn't feel so isolated but they didn't get around much either.

People made fun of the Model T Ford as this comic postcard suggests. Other pictures in the Ford Archives show the versatile car used to carry a goat on the running board, to drive into a stream to fish from, and adapted to provide power for silo filling and sawing wood. Courtesy, Ford Archives, Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan

Michigan's first automobiles--people frequently called them "machines"--appeared in Detroit in the mid-1890's. But cars were a rarity even at the end of the decade; thus the automobile made no appreciable impact on the state in the 19th century.

But the auto industry grew rapidly, and it was to change profoundly the state and its people--ruralist and cityfolk alike--during the first three decades of the 20th century, the period of the great transformation that we shall consider here.

Motor vehicles changed life in so many ways that one must be selective in discussing the changes. This wideranging subject has never been fully explored, and of course one day it must be in definitive fashion.

What happened to Michigan's farmers with the advent of the automobile? With cars, they drove past the crossroads store to a village. If they didn't like the merchandise there, they drove on to the county seat, maybe twenty miles away. With trucks they carried produce to more distant markets than before; thus perishable goods were made available to consumers in better condition. With this kind of mobility, crossroads stores, country churches, and one-room schools began to close. Farm life became less lonely. Farmers themselves began to dress so they couldn't be distinguished from most town folk except by their tanned skin and calloused hands.

People in small towns also began to change. At the turn of the century they had thronged Main Street on the Fourth of July, flying flags, parading, and later listening to speeches and shooting off fireworks in the park. People celebrated in town, because it was difficult to get outside the city. By the end of the 1920's, however, many Main Streets were deserted on the Fourth. Much of the citizenry was joy riding through the countryside.

In Michigan's larger cities,

during the first three decades of the century, increasing numbers of people began driving their cars downtown to shop or for entertainment. Streets wide enough to accommodate horses and buggies and perhaps streetcars were crowded with autos and trucks. If you have any doubt of it, you need merely look at 1920's pictures of monumental traffic jams. Propelled into the auto age, city fathers began imposing stricter traffic regulations and installing stop signs and traffic lights. By 1935, they also had gotten around to installing the first parking meters.

City retailers also had to face up to new traffic conditions during the 1920's. Curbside parking proved inadequate, and some merchants began providing free parking space next to their stores. Entrepreneurs began building garages and tearing down buildings to make way for parking lots. Visionary store managers built branches in out-lying areas of the city, and a few even ventured to towns beyond the city limits.

Corner grocery stores began to go out of business. When people walked to grocery stores, such places of business were dotted throughout the community. But motorized women searched out larger, centralized stores, which, because of higher volume, if nothing else, could charge less than their corner counterparts. Women also began to drive to civic and social activities, and to drive their children to school. Some children also began to board school buses.

At the turn of the century, most factory workers lived in the shadow of their employer's smokestack, and white-collar workers lived within easy walking or streetcar distance of their jobs. But the automobile changed that. Motorized wage-earners could move to the outer fringes of cities, and even into the countryside, where they could find fresh air, a plot of ground, and the privilege of pushing a lawn mower. Businessmen, by the same token, could build factories outside the center of town, or in places not convenient to streetcar lines. Cities such as Ann Arbor were infused with commuter blood, and new housing developments and communities began to emerge. Never mind that steam or electric rail service never served, nor ever would serve any of these areas; the commuters would manage with their cars.

Later many of the factories themselves would join the exodus to the rapidly-growing suburbs, in the process helping to boost land values beyond the city. Meantime, inner city property began depreciating in value. With regard to suburbia and all that it has come to stand for--shopping centers and drive-in restaurants, banks, cleaners, even funeral homes--the auto's impact was to be felt far more in the post-World War II period than during the first three decades of the century. Still, what was to come was an extension of what had been started by 1930.

The auto's impact on the economy was felt in many other ways. In 1929, automobile manufacturers accounted for nearly 13 percent of American industrial production, employed slightly more than 7 percent of factory wage earners, and consumed 15 percent of the nation's steel production and a comparable percentage of the output of the rubber, plate glass, nickel, and lead industries. By that time, too, the auto had spawned or invigorated many other industries and launched thousands of new business enterprises. Billboards reared their heads along every well-traveled stretch of highway. Service stations did likewise, and in cities it was not uncommon for busy intersections to sport gas pumps on each corner. Every hamlet had its Ford and Chevrolet dealership, and cities of any size boasted a score of additional dealerships. It wouldn't be long before the auto industry could begin boasting that one out of every six businesses in America was related to the motor vehicle, and that one out of every seven jobs was related to the automobile.

The automotive industry itself, by now largely centered in Southeastern Michigan, made history as have few other industries. It built the world's first concrete-reinforced factories. It developed and popularized the moving assembly line and mass production as we have known it for the past six decades. It boosted wage levels, and as the cliche has it, it quite simply put the nation on wheels. The industry produced two firms, Ford and General Motors, the histories of which, to future students of the 20th century, will loom much more importantly than the history of such countries as Switzerland or Sweden. The industry also produced Henry Ford, the most influential person in Michigan's history, and one of America's greatest figures, according to dozens of public-opinion surveys.

The automobile touched lives in many other ways. Take, for example, its effect on romance and courtship, a subject on which virtually nothing has been written. Yet sex itself, as divorced from cars, is discussed almost endlessly. Perhaps, the paucity of literature on sex and the automobile stems from the fact that there is no mine of information on the subject. The Detroit Public Library's Automotive History Collection, finest of its kind in the world, has, for example, no file on sex and the auto, and can point to little material dealing with the topic. One, therefore, cannot "research" the subject; he must content himself with uncovering nuggets of information as he reads on other topics.

Romance and courtship, of course, antedate the automobile. Nineteenth century couples spooned on lawn or front porch swings or in the parlor. All too often, however, Mother hovered about, and obnoxious kid brothers and sisters hung

around at least long enough to see if they could be bought off. Couples also strolled off into the countryside or in parks on nice evenings, and, as bicycles came into vogue, they could cycle their way into the Elysian fields. For the more affluent, there also was the horse and buggy.

The horse and buggy had certain disadvantages for young lovers. The buggy admitted mosquitoes in the summer and the cold in the winter, and the horse sometimes made noises not altogether compatible with romance. At the same time, the horse offered youthful swains one advantage denied them by the automobile: horsepower that knew the way home. If on a familiar road, a rural Romeo could tie the reins lightly around the whipsocket, and expect Dobbin to maintain a steady clippity-clop right down the middle of the road. And, as some sage once said, two hands are better than one.

Then sputtered upon the scene the automobile, complete with serpent-shaped bulb horn. Village maidens soon deployed themselves at strategic intersections, pinching color into their cheeks, hoping that a goggled chauffeur would shortly appear to invite them for a spin.

★ Song writers, always attuned to the times, were among the first to anticipate the romantic opportunities opened up by the automobile. During the first two decades of the century, they mixed passion with gasoline in hundreds of such songs as "In Our Little Love Mobile," "Riding in Love's Limousine," "Take Me Out for a Joy Ride," "When He Wanted to Love Her He Put Up The Cover," "Fifteen Kisses on a Gallon of Gas," and "Tumble in a Rumble."

★ Parking and sparking and out-of-gas stories and cartoons filled the popular magazines. Many of the jokes centered around the detachable seats that were removed from cars for idyllic pleasures. Thus one famous cartoon of the 1920's showed a bedraggled couple appearing in a police court, carrying a rear seat cushion, and reporting a stolen car.

Clergymen, predictably, cast a jaundiced eye at joy riding, and sermonized against the prolifigate young men who were whisking maidens off to debauchery in their devil wagons at speeds ranging from 8 to 20 miles per hour. Their views were reinforced by a 1924 report of an Indiana city which noted that, of 30 girls brought to court for illicit love making, 19 admitted having committed the offense in an automobile.

Anthropologists also assessed the automobile. Some of them said that cars eventually would improve the American species, especially in areas which heretofore had had poor transportation facilities. In such areas, the scientists pointed out, the field of courtship was immediately extended from the five-mile radius of the horse and buggy to the 50 mile radius of the car, thereby providing for much-needed crossbreeding.

The automobile naturally became one more point on which parents and adolescents could disagree; and of course the teen-agers won out in the end. By the 1920's, chaperones, if not as extinct as the passenger pigeon, were at least as scarce as blacksmiths. As the decade wore on, parents increasingly began to suspect that their youngsters were parked on country lanes for purposes other than that of enjoying the silvery moonlight, and every survey of sexual relations taken since that time has confirmed parents' worst fears.

Among women born between 1900 and 1909, for example, 38 percent admitted to Dr. Kinsey and his associates in 1953 that, during their youth, they had had sexual intercourse in automobiles--and this, despite the fact that the first drive-in theater did not open until 1933. At drive-ins, so the sayings went, there often was a better show in the cars than on the screen, and the sounds of zippers often drowned out the film's dialogue. Small wonder that many 19th century-bred parents regarded the automobile as a bedroom, if not a brothel, on wheels; agreed with John Steinbeck that more babies were conceived in Model T's than in beds; and came to regard the automobile as the chief enemy of the home and of society.

The automobile has, in fact, become a brothel on wheels. The Detroit Police Department, among other units of its kind, acknowledged in 1974 that acts of prostitution were being carried out on city streets--in closed, curtained vans. The Department added that its hands were tied--that it could not invade the privacy of such vans without search warrants.

Auto manufacturers have been aware of the tie-in between sex and the automobile. On the one hand, Henry Ford, according to rumor, built Model T seats only 38 inches wide so as to discourage illicit lovemaking in flivvers. William C. Durant, of Durant Motors, on the other hand, led the parade of manufacturers who at one time or another have equipped vehicles with a folding front seat, which, coupled with the lower cushion of the rear seat, forms a bed. But no American manufacturer has gone as far as the French bodybuilder who designed and installed bidets, as well as beds, into cars.

American automakers frequently have been accused of designing sexual symbols into cars on the theory that people don't buy automobiles, but instead buy dreams of sex, speed, and power. True or not, Ford, in response to Mustang customers who complained that buckets seats hindered romance, made regular bench-type front seats available as an option; and the same company wired its "heartfelt thanks" to the Fox Point, Wisconsin village board for

having rejected a proposed ordinance which could have placed a $6.00 fine on the kissing occupants of parked cars. "All such proposals," said the automaker, "Smack of a threat to...spoon, moon, June, and love in bloom." Ford's response to the Italian law which forbids kissing in a car, even when the windows are frosted, is unknown.

The auto also has had revolutionary effects on banditry. In the 19th century, bandits generally hijacked trains in the countryside. Galloping away from a train was much easier than riding away from a downtown bank on horseback. Thanks to the auto, however, as early as 1912, gunmen were turning to cars for getaways, and the police were obliged to follow suit in going after them. In 1912, Detroit's Police Department acquired its first car, a Regal roadster capable of doing 60 miles per hour. In 1921, the Motor City's Department became the first to equip one of its cars, a Model T, with a radio, complete with a forest of antennae. Armored cars made their appearance in the 1920's, and the first armored truck robbery occurred in 1927. By this time cars together with Prohibition had made hijacking a regular occurrence, and had also helped make Prohibition a mockery.

Gangsters rode around in motorized fortresses with armor-plated bodies and tops and double-paneled glass windows. Al Capone, however, sometimes covered his tracks in an inconspicuous dust-covered maroon 1931 Model A Ford sedan. John Dillinger's favorite getaway car was a Ford V-8. While passing through Detroit, Dillinger wrote Henry Ford: "Hello Old Pal. Arrived here at 10 a.m. today. Would like to drop in and see you. You have a wonderful car..it's a treat to drive one. Your slogan should be: 'Drive a Ford and watch the other cars fall behind you.' I can make any other car take a Ford's dust. Bye-bye."

Bonnie and Clyde's favorite car also was a V-8. "While I still got breath in my lungs," Clyde wrote Henry Ford in 1934, "I will tell you what a dandy car you make. I have drove Fords exclusively when I could get away with one. For sustained speed and freedom from trouble the Ford has got every other car skinned and even if my business hasn't been strictly legal it don't hurt anthing to tell you what a fine car you got in the V-8."

The V-8's getaway qualifications notwithstanding, the 1930 Model A, not the V-8, was rated by Motor Trend in 1974 as the greatest "git car" in all of history, followed by the 1924 Locomobile, and the 1933 Reo Straight 8.

The automobile affected mores in other ways. Church attendance, already on the decline before World War I, declined even more after the war as golf and the ritual of the Sunday drive competed with services. Doctors noticed an increase in the number of hernia patients, as more and more people cranked autos. Physicians at first fretted about the unhealthful side effects of jouncing about in cars, and positively ruled out drives for pregnant women and hemorrhoid sufferers. But shock absorbers, springs, improved seats, and balloon tires--plus doughnut-shaped cushions for hemorrhoid sufferers--not only brought on a reversal of opinion, but a belief that motoring into the countryside was generally therapeutic for medical patients and the general public alike.

Having discovered the automobile, motorists began taking to the roads not only on Sunday afternoons, but on weekend jaunts, and even vacations. Before the automobile, vacations were once-a-year events requiring considerable advance planning and reservations well in advance. But the auto turned every weekend into a mini-vacation; and on their vacations proper, people began to motor all over the country, putting up at night wherever they might land. Old-line resort hotels, which once booked vacationers for two weeks or an entire summer, found themselves becoming transient hotels, entertaining guests for a night. Many went out of business. Railroads serving vacation resorts lost most of their business. Meantime, enterprising farmers and entrepreneurs began building cabins, then tourist courts along roadways. Such places eventually aroused the ire of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which saw in them not only cesspools of the "hot pillow" trade, but also convenient hideaways for motorized bandits. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, citing a Southern Methodist University study which discovered that some cabins were rented 16 times a night, complained that bona-fide travelers were often denied accommodations because there was "more money and faster turnover in the couple trade." No wonder. said the authors of "U.S.A Confidential," that the Detroit classified phone book listed motels under "Amusement business."

People quickly came to take the car for granted. It gave Americans something never completely possessed before--a sense of freedom, a feeling of independence, a means of escape from the monotony of day-to-day surroundings. With their own cars, people found a new way of satisfying their love of motion, a convenient way to perform the errands of life. A car multiplied power, expanded horizons. When a farm wife was asked by a U.S. Department of Agriculture investigator why the family owned a car when it didn't own a bathtub, the woman was surprised by the question. "Why," she replied, "you can't go to town in a bathtub."

People once thought of the car as simply a substitute for the horse and buggy. But of course it quickly became more than that, and in an amazingly short period

of time it changed the whole pattern of America–its sex and family life, as well as its economics. Other artifacts also have changed our manners, morals, and mores, and certain of them have been more spectacular, at least in their inception, then the automobile. But perhaps the automobile, in the end, did more to bring about change than any other artifact that might be named.

At least that was the opinion of students of The University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business Administration, to whom a few years ago I put the question, "What artifact has done more to change America's way of life than any other?" They rated the automobile first by an overwhelming margin, followed by television, radio, the railroad, the telephone, the computer, and the Pill. As we think about it, who's to say they are wrong.

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Editor's Note: David L. Lewis, who was the February speaker, is professor of business history in the U-M School of Business Administration. He earned a Ph.D. degree in history at the University. He is a former newspaper and General Motors public relations man.

CALENDAR OF LOCAL EVENTS

Chelsea Area Historical Society--Meets monthly on second Monday at 8 p.m. in Women's Club Room of McKune Library.

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Dexter Historical Society--7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 20, at Webster Church. An history of the church will be read and presented to the church. The Dexter Society meets every other month.

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Milan Historical Society--Meets at 7:30 p.m. third Wednesday of month at Milan Community House. March 19 Ralph Muncy will speak on methods of researching family histories. He is chariman and a co-founder with his wife of the Genealogy Section of the county society. He is also a member of the WHS board

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Saline Area Historical Society--Meets monthly at 8 p.m. on third Tuesday in Saline High School cafeteria. March 18 Saline "Plant and Pray" Club will be guests. The program will be on gardening and historic gardens, including slides of Colonial Williamsburg gardens.

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Ypsilanti Historical Society--3 p.m. Sunday, March 23, at Ypsilanti Historical Museum, 220 N. Huron St. Archie Stobie of State Museum in Lansing will show slides of the Florence Babbitt collection in the state museum. Dottie Disbrow, YHS archivist, will give a biographical sketch of Miss Babbitt, an Ypsilantian who made an extensive collection of antiques. The Museum will have its Babbitt collection on display. (Eastern Michigan University also has a Babbitt collection.) Miss Babbitt's father was Washtenaw County probate judge from 1888 to 1896.

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Ypsilanti Historical Museum--April 19 and 20, 2-4 p.m., quilting demonstration and exhibit by Mrs. Clayton Hopp; needlepointing demonstration by Mr. James Westfall.

NEED A RIDE?

If you need a ride to the meeting, call Frank Everett at 663-5723. He can arrange for someone near you to pick you up.

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MARCH 20, 1975
8:00 P.M.
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LIBERTY AT DIVISION

Miss Eileen Harrison
322 E. Cross St.
Ypsilanti, Mi. 48197